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ABSTRACT

Americans generally lack foreign language competence, and their exposure to foreign languages in the United States is inadequate. Foreign language instruction is deficient in both quality and quantity, and although there are indications of improvement in both areas, it will be many years before the effects of improvements are clear. The consequences of generalized language incompetence include an international trade gap that threatens both short- and long-term economic stability, inadequate intelligence and international communication that threaten national security, and cultural isolation. Foreign language instruction should begin as early as possible in children's education to be maximally effective. All students, not just the gifted, are likely to benefit from foreign language exposure. The first step toward becoming a language-competent society is a commitment to language study at all levels of the school system, using the institutionalization of language and culture study to improve language and cultural attitudes. (MSE)

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ERIC DIGEST

ERIC Clearinghouse on
Languages and Linguistics

THE NEED FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

Prepared by Else Hamayan
November 1986

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

ERIC Digest

The Need for Foreign Language Competence in The United States

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How Language Competent Are Americans?

Not very competent. In the words of Sen. Paul Simon, the United States is a "linguistically malnourished" country compared with many other nations. Despite the large number of individuals from other language and cultural backgrounds who live in various communities throughout the United States, relatively few Americans can boast proficiency in a language other than English. While ample opportunities exist in other countries to develop proficiency in a second language, exposure to foreign languages in the United States is far from adequate.

Why Aren't More U.S. Citizens Proficient in Foreign Languages?

The problems with foreign language instruction in the United States have been both quantitative and qualitative. Significant trends, such as that begun with the passing of the National Defense Education Act (1958), have sparked interest in foreign language study in this country, but interest has never been sustained over a long enough period to show the development of appreciable levels of foreign language proficiency. Unfortunately, the notion that foreign language instruction is an essential component of the school curriculum has never become a permanent concern, and language study in general has suffered from its status as educational fad. While never very substantial, for example, the numbers of secondary school and undergraduate college students studying a foreign language in this country dropped rather dramatically in the mid 70's, and very few elementary school students were exposed to foreign language instruction in the classroom at all. Even though there is present cause for optimism in increased numbers of individuals studying foreign languages at all levels of the school system, a primary concern must be in finding a way for foreign languages to remain part of the standard school curriculum.

Qualitatively, foreign language instruction in this country has focused on the development of formal structural knowledge rather than on developing communicative competence. Fortunately, this, too, is changing throughout the country, where more and more teachers are making use of innovative teaching approaches that promote the use of the foreign language for meaningful interaction. Thus, the outlook for the future is good if the present trends are sustained, but it will be many years before we will feel the effects of having had a generation grow up with foreign language training at all levels of the school system.

What Are Some Consequences of Language Incompetence?

The geographic isolation of the United States and the growing importance of English in the world have contributed to giving Americans a false sense of security vis à vis their need for foreign language competence. The fact is that the consequences of a mostly monolingual American society undermine our economic, political and social well-being.

From an economic standpoint, the United States suffers from an international trade gap which has a debilitating effect on our economy in the short term, and which seriously threatens our economic well-being in the future. International businesses that are not adequately prepared to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of their foreign clientele very often lose the big account, and contribute in a very substantial way to this economic problem. For example, when General Motors marketed its Chevrolet Nova in Puerto Rico and Latin America, no one realized that Nova, when spoken as two words in Spanish, means "It doesn't go." Sales were quite low until the name was changed for greater appeal! As international trade becomes a more integral part of the U.S. economy, the need for sales and marketing representatives who are fluent in the language of their buyers and who understand their buyers' culture becomes increasingly important.

The second domain that is adversely affected by U.S. citizens' lack of proficiency in foreign languages is political: some claim that linguistic incompetence poses a serious threat to our national security. Prior to the terrorist attack on the Berlin discotheque in March 1986, U.S. intelligence was intercepting messages from Tripoli to the Libyan People's Bureau in Berlin, and was unable to find an American employee who could interpret the messages, which were in Berber. Had these messages been interpreted in time, a tragedy might have been averted. Better intelligence about other countries and better communication with them are keys to political well-being.

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Finally, the cultural isolation that results from a lack of exposure to foreign languages deprives U.S. students of a well-rounded global education, including knowledge about the fine arts, literature, history, and geography of other parts of the world. Additionally, our refusal as a nation to recognize the need for language competence and cultural awareness contributes to the widely-held image of the arrogant American seeking to impose his language and culture on the world at large. The ability to speak other countries' languages with an awareness and understanding of their cultures is obviously crucial to effective communication.

At What Age Can We Start to Teach a Foreign Language?

As early as possible. Research in the field of language acquisition suggests that for the child undergoing normal development in the native language, the earlier instruction begins in the foreign language, the higher the level of proficiency the child will likely attain in that language (Krashen, Long and Scarcella, 1979). Because children are cognitively, affectively and socially more flexible than adolescents or adults, they are naturally more "efficient" foreign language learners. In fact, data from children who are raised bilingually indicate that given a supportive environment, a child can start learning two languages from birth. Moreover, children who are adequately exposed to two languages at an early age experience certain cognitive gains: they seem more flexible and creative, and they reach higher levels of cognitive development at an earlier age than their monolingual peers. Thus, there are both strong pedagogical and psychological reasons for making foreign language instruction part of the regular school curriculum for students at the earliest grade levels.

Who Should Receive Foreign Language Instruction?

All students, not only the gifted, are likely to benefit from exposure to foreign language instruction at all levels of the school experience. Research strongly indicates that intelligence plays only a minor role in predicting the achievement of foreign language proficiency (Genesee, 1976). A positive attitude toward other languages and cultures, an openness and flexibility in learning style, and a high level of motivation are the most important qualities a student can bring to the foreign language learning experience.

How Do We Become a Language-Competent Society?

The first step in becoming a language-competent society is to embark upon a commitment to language study at all levels of the school system. Attitudinal change is indeed essential, but the only way to effect widespread attitudinal change is to institutionalize the study of foreign languages and cultures in our schools. Interested parents, school officials, policymakers, and members of the international business community have become convinced of the usefulness of foreign language study; they must take on the responsibility of convincing others that foreign language competence is desirable, and indeed necessary for our future well-being.

While interested individuals and organizations should be aware of short-term circumstances which aid the push for language competence in the U.S., such as an advantageous political climate in the Congress, the overriding goal of any campaign for language competence must be to impress upon the public and policymakers alike the importance of a sustained effort in this regard. The development of foreign language competence in the United States will not occur after fits and starts of interest in language study, but only after many years of unwavering commitment to foreign language instruction in our schools.

Resources

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
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